

Statement for Markup of H.Con.Res. 190
Rep. Christopher H. Smith, Chairman
November 15, 2005

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am pleased to convene this markup of H.Con.Res. 190, expressing the sense of the Congress that the Russian Federation should fully protect the freedoms of all religious communities without distinction, whether registered or unregistered, as stipulated by the Russian Constitution and international standards.

In April of this year, as Co-Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, I convened a hearing to highlight the plight of unregistered religious groups in Russia. At the hearing, we heard moving testimony about arson attacks and police raids occurring sporadically, yet consistently, across the vast Russian Federation.

I'll never forget the pictures I saw of the arson attack against a Baptist church in Tula. After receiving numerous anonymous threats, late one night hate mongers finally took action and razed the church to the ground. The local authorities have been no help, attributing the explosion to a natural gas leak, although the local gas company reportedly found no gas residue at the site.

The actions (or inaction) of local authorities send a clear message that unregistered communities are unwelcome. While religious freedoms are generally respected at the federal level, minority religious communities continue to report serious problems.

Since the hearing, the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Russia's North Caucasus faces the confiscation of its church because of filing errors when it

attempted to register. Independent Muslim groups continue to face government pressure, discrimination and even jail. Further indicative of the challenges being faced by religious communities in this Putin era, in October, Moscow's Chief Rabbi, Pinchas Goldschmidt, was denied a visa for reentry into Russia, despite his having lived in Moscow since 1989. And this month, Moscow authorities overturned the decision to allot land for the construction of a Krishna temple, leaving the Moscow Krishna community without a place of worship.

The State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom released last week offered further evidence. It reported how "conditions deteriorated for some minority religious faiths" and that "some federal agencies and many local authorities continued to restrict the rights of various religious minorities."

Based on the findings of the Helsinki Commission hearing and the ongoing problems, I decided to introduce H.Con.Res. 190. Foremost, this resolution urges the Russian Federation to ensure the "full protection of freedoms for all religious communities without distinction, whether registered and unregistered, and end the harassment of unregistered religious groups by the security apparatus and other government agencies." It also urges Russia to ensure that "law enforcement officials vigorously investigate acts of violence against unregistered religious communities, as well as make certain that authorities are not complicit in such attacks."

In addition, many of the victims coming from unregistered religious communities do not have networks of coreligionists in America and Western Europe to advocate on their behalf. To remedy this, the resolution calls on all U.S.

Embassy officials to “continue to raise concerns with the Government of the Russian Federation over violations of religious freedom, including those against unregistered religious communities, especially indigenous denominations not well known in the United States.”

The resolution has 27 cosponsors, including many Members of this Subcommittee. I encourage my colleagues to support the measure.